

NOTES ON *TURDUS MERULA* IN SOUTH INDIA

BY

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In the winter of 1947 I collected a number of blackbirds in the Nilgiris and Biligirirangan Hills, which on later examination in the Museum at Yale appeared highly provocative. For assistance and the loan of material of this species I am grateful to Mr. J. L. Peters of the Harvard Museum, and to the authorities of the American Museum of Natural History. I am most grateful also to Lt.-Col. E. G. Phythian-Adams and Randolph C. Morris, Esq., for assistance in collecting specimens.

Whistler and Kinnear in the Eastern Ghats Survey (1932) have discussed exhaustively the range of the non-Himalayan Indian blackbirds but I cannot entirely agree with their conclusions. In the first place published records of the occurrence of one race or the other in an area are without subspecific value unless substantiated by specimens. In the second place my collections show the occurrence of two forms of the blackbird in the Nilgiris thereby reversing Whistler and Kinnear's systematic conclusions.

Specimens taken by me were collected in March and were presumably on their breeding grounds, as some birds were coming into breeding condition and all were singing. Birds were taken north of Ootacamund at Kalhatti on the northern fringe of the Nilgiri Plateau at 5,250 feet, and on Dodabetta, the hill south-east of Ootacamund, at 8,650 feet and at Avalanche in the south-western part of the Plateau at 6,500 feet. These birds definitely divide into two groups. The lower altitude birds from the northern part of the Plateau may be listed as Type A. They are distinctly brownish below and grayish-brown above, with, in the male, a tendency to a paler brown nuchal ring and a well-defined black cap. The birds from the higher altitudes and the more southerly parts of the Plateau may be listed as Type B. They are distinctly grayish-brown below and darker blackish-gray above with a black cap which shades into the back without any well-defined demarcation.

Through the kindness of Mr. J. L. Peters, specimens of both these phenotypes have been compared with Lafresnaye's type of *Turdus nigropileus* in the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. Although the type is old and very faded, as well as being in worn plumage, it has a distinct black cap and auriculars and appears to be the black-capped brown bird of the northern part of the Nilgiri Plateau, my Type A above.

Jerdon (1862) discussing his *Merula simillima*, describes it as 'entirely black, conspicuously darker on the head and back of neck; somewhat lighter beneath, and tinged with dusky-brownish.' He gives its range as the summit of the 'Neilgherry' and 'Pulney' hills. From the above it seems quite clear that *simillimus* is my Type B.

From the above it will be seen that two populations occur in the Nilgiris, one in the lower parts from Ootacamund north, the other

on the higher slopes to the south of that town. I hereby restrict the type locality of *nigropileus* to 'Kalhatti, Northern Nilgiri Plateau', and of *simillimus* to 'Avalanche, higher Southern Nilgiri Plateau'.

Comparing specimens from the Western Ghats, Biligirirangan Hills and northern Nilgiris it seems apparent that there is a distinct cline in color, the palest birds being found naturally to the north and the darkest being my Kalhatti specimens. In addition Kalhatti birds have the most rounded wings. However, I do not believe that these differences are sufficient to require the retention of the name *mahrattensis* proposed by Whistler and Kinnear (1932).

I would, therefore, retain the following forms:

Turdus merula nigropileus (Lafresnaye).

Synonym: *Turdus simillimus mahrattensis* Whistler and Kinnear.

Range: Evergreen biotope in the Western Ghats from Surat to Malabar (probably including Coorg), Biligirirangan Hills and Bandipur in Mysore and northern fringe of Nilgiri Plateau. On the eastern side of the Peninsula to the Nallamalai Hills (Ferahabad *vide* Whistler 1933). In winter northern birds apparently wander south as far as the Cardamom Hills and the Travancore ranges where individuals may be found from November at least through March.

Turdus merula spencei Whistler and Kinnear

Range: Evergreen sholas in Eastern Ghats from the Seshachalam Hills and probably the Palkonda and Velikonda range north to the hills of Bastar and Jeypore. Apparently intergrades with *nigropileus* in south-eastern Hyderabad (Nallamalai Hills).

Turdus merula simillimus Jerdon

Range: Evergreen sholas in the higher hills of the central and southern Nilgiri Plateau, the Brahmagherries and south to the Palni Hills where it intergrades with the next race. A resident, non-migratory race.

Turdus merula bourdilloni (Seebohm)

Range: Evergreen forest in the higher hills of Travancore north to the Nelliampathies and Palnis where it intergrades with *simillimus*. A resident, non-migratory race.

Turdus merula kinnisii (Blyth)

Range: Dense evergreen and pines in the central highest hills of Ceylon. A resident race.

LITERATURE CITED

- Jerdon, T. C. (1862): The Birds of India, Calcutta. 1: 524.
 Whistler, H. and Kinnear, N. B. (1932): The Vernay Scientific Survey of the Eastern Ghats (Ornithological Section). *Journ., Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, 35: 75-77.
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